Design Sense

A newsletter on Packaging, Product Styling, Store Planning and Merchandising trends
Lippincott & Margulies, Inc., Industrial Designers, 430 Park Avenue, New York
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Is Good Design Practical?

The designer's art involves a very specialized mode of thinking. He is always concerned with things as they are, and, at the same time, must, in a very practical sense, be directing his skills at what they could possibly be. Perhaps the greatest satisfaction in his working life is the achievement of a change which brings the product or package on which he is working, one step closer to an ideal.

This is possibly a highflown position from which to examine the subject of this article, yet it is nevertheless a correct starting point. It is widely assumed that the one function of a design is to make a product "prettier" -- to "dress it up" or "give it class." In fact, the major function of design is to make the product perform its job better, and inherent in this improved performance is the designer's job to help the product better express its own function, by its design.

It is similarly assumed that you must keep your designer in check because he is always up in the wild blue yonder, simply not practical, since he is an artist after all.

The new American Seating Company chair shown here is a case in point. One unit of a redesigned line of school furniture, it follows a trend to deinstitutionalize the classroom. Grimness, say the manufacturers, is being taken out of education. Emerging now are campus type schools with informal interiors where children put pin-ups on a cork bulletin board and bring their pet mice into the classroom. Equipment suppliers have been slow in accepting educational informality, however. As late as 1953, according to one

From rugged clumsiness to rugged grace . . .

educator, no "really comfortable low-cost desk and chair had been produced." The problem was to design a line which would suggest the home living room to the children, but which, while not sacrificing durability to style, could withstand the ravages of the young. The theory was that children are exposed to contemporary styling and design in their homes, new stores and transportation, and are adversely affected by stodgy, heavy looking furniture.

American Seating had been using stamped steel in a sturdy, block-like, rather ugly design, an engineer's concept of how to get the strongest possible chair using the minimum of materials. The new chair is all steel except for a plywood seat and back. Despite its graceful appearance, it is extremely rugged and has come through sandbag destruction tests in the American Seating Company laboratories. The design is a good example of close coordination between creative styling and the product engineering group of the American Seating Company, spearheaded by Bill Hendrickson.

"If you want to keep the title to your success...use life insurance"
The NORTHWESTERN MUTUAL Life Insurance Company
Really relaxed
NEW ENGLAND Mutual LIFE
your home is worth more now—
is it properly insured?
THE HOME
State Farm Mutual

How to Lose Your Identity

Why do people buy insurance? Although the insurance industry has made a number of guesses, and established a number of policies, there is no one who can give an unequivocal answer to this question. Even less answerable, to date, is the question: what makes people buy one company's insurance rather than another's?

The companies, to judge from their advertising, would seem to be certain (a) that advertising pays, but (b) it isn't necessary to establish a real visual identity for a company.

This is paradoxical. Since we don't know why insurance is purchased, it would seem that the alert company would want to give its brand every possible advantage and identity. Yet the brandmarks* on this page are not eyecatching, are generally more alike than different, and reveal little concern with establishing individualized symbols which will make my company stand out in the crowd -- whether on the pages of a magazine, in the midst of a batch of mail, or in the agent's cards.

We suggest that insurance companies can create identifiable distinctive symbols which might add considerably to the feeling of confidence in a company, which would seem to be a key element in insurance purchase.

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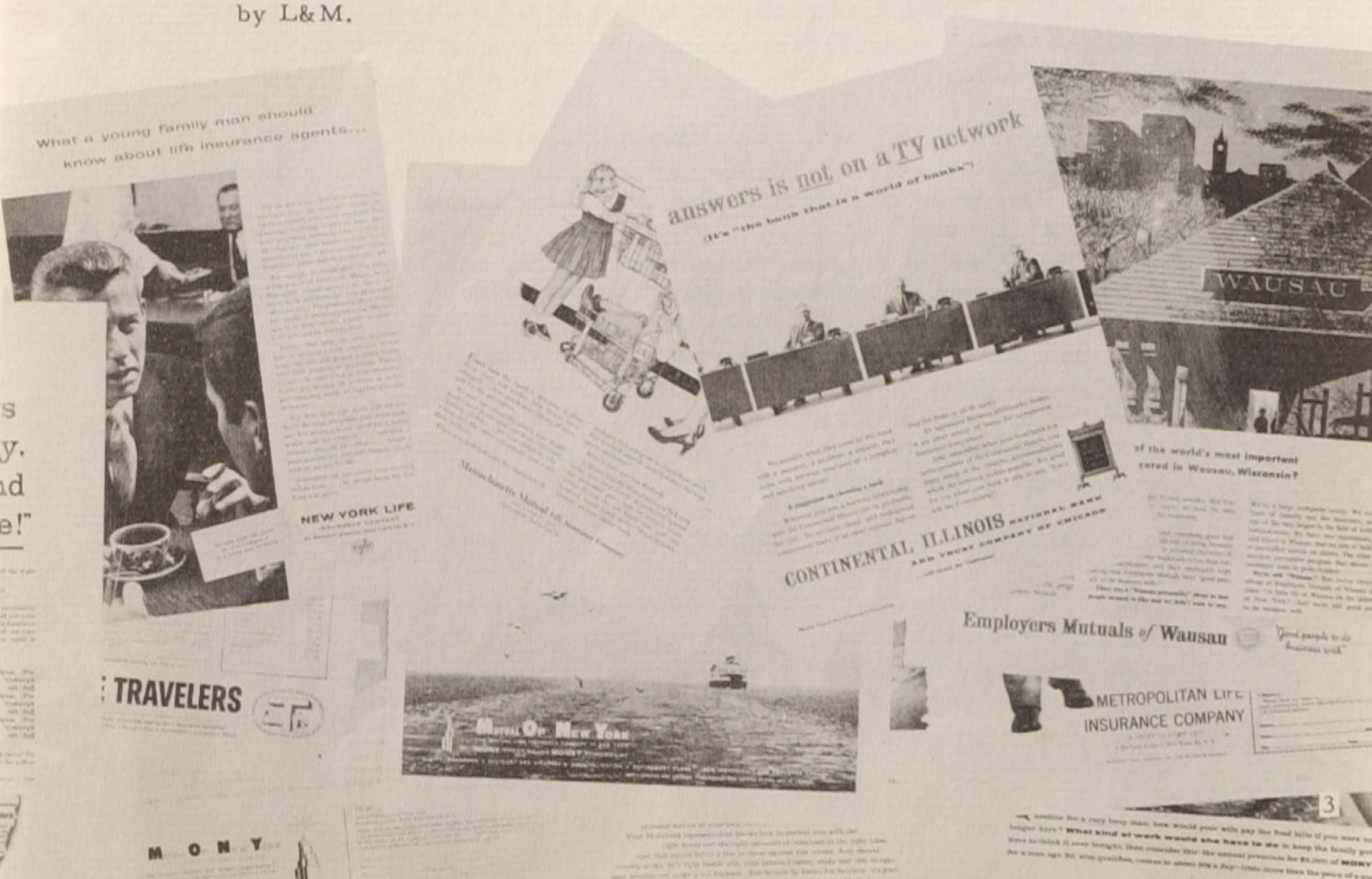
* A distinctive design symbolizing a product or company; a term coined by L&M.



New Research Techniques Promise for Packagers

Identification—she knows it's Bromo-Seltzer from the shape. Study by Crossley, S-D Surveys

Our own consistent emphasis on the use of marketing research as a package testing device was recently reinforced again, at the First Design Symposium of the Packaging Design Council held at Silvermine, Connecticut. A good portion of the one day program was devoted to a session called "Creative Uses of Marketing Research Techniques."

Although many different techniques of package research have been developed, none has received universal acceptance. Perhaps the principal reason for no one research technique being accepted by all designers arises from the fact that no one method is applicable to every packaging problem.

The best approach, we feel, is that the research project must be engineered to fit the particular problem, that no problem should be forced into the mold of a specific type of research technique.

Some of the newer techniques, developed in university laboratories, have not yet been applied to packaging. But psychologists tell of tests that reveal how a respondent feels (often regardless of how he says he feels) about the color, size, shape, texture of researched objects. Clearly these tests have meaning outside the campus and are bound to be adopted by commercial research firms, making possible more and more accurate information for the packager as to what he should accomplish with his package design.

Q SORTING GIVES PREFERENCE CUES

We were interested to learn for example, of the statistical technique of preference research called "Q Sorting." Q Sorting appears to be one of the tools which may provide designers with an objective measure of the extent to which specific design elements meet the criteria that have been

established. In Q Sorting, the respondent is asked to separate a large number of different designs into specific categories, along a scale. Suppose, for example, we have developed a large number of varying designs for a package. Motivational research has already shown that the package must convey a feeling of freshness. We would then set up a scale from "freshness" to "staleness". The respondent is asked to sort the package designs in the various bins ranging from the one marked "freshest" to the one marked "stalest". He is limited as to the number of choices he can sort into any one of the bins. The limitation is based upon an application of the statistical normal curve. Once this has been conducted among a sufficient number of respondents, it is very simple to discard the designs which do not signify freshness to the consumer. If we repeat this test, basing our scale upon the various criteria for the package (lightness, readability) we end up with a complete profile of each projected design.

THE VALUE OF QUICK RESPONSES

Psychological research is also concerning itself to a large extent with immediate attitudes, which, to our mind, is all to the good for design purposes. Rather than being asked either directly or indirectly for a considered response, the respondent is told to "act as fast as you can in carrying out this test." Since consumer buying decisions are made quickly, and, most frequently, superficially, it is often useful to know what the quick, superficial response to a package will be.

Often the design of a single package involves three or four research problems. Some firms conduct surveys to determine the general direction a design should follow before any actual design work begins. Unstructured, or free-association interviews, and projective tests seek out the consumer's opinions and desires for data affecting the package. At any point in design development, it may be necessary to research to find out in an unbiased manner which of a number of design elements come closest to what is sought. Or watching the consumer in a sales situation, observing his behavioral patterns in the course of his purchase decisions, may provide a clue that will influence some aspect of the design. Once the design is complete, it may be tested again, in the marketplace, for more information on how it may best be marketed.

Management and Design at Aspen

HOW MANAGEMENT CAN PLAN FOR GOOD DESIGN

Each June the majestic sculpture of the Colorado Rockies at Aspen serves as a fitting setting for the most important gathering of design professionals. This year, Ralph Delahayes Paine, publisher of Fortune Magazine, chaired the Sixth such conference, which concerned itself with "Ideas on the Future of Man and Design." Speaking as the American representative at a session entitled "Management and Design," J. Gordon Lippincott shared the podium with distinguished designers from England, Sweden, France and Japan. The following is an excerpt from his speech.

The sound management of design will be increasingly important in the immediate future, since design is the key sales influence and marketing costs are becoming so great that it is ever more hazardous to have less than the best. What are the overall principles around which management can make its individual plans?

1) A Creative Climate: Some corporations have creative management; they are seeking new products, new markets. They have a climate where new ideas are welcome, and have procedures for evaluating new ideas. It is hard to picture a stodgy, unimaginative management with an outstandingly creative group. In short, the management group itself must be creative to provide a climate where design can grow with the best results.

2) A Goal for the Designer and a Clearly Defined Responsibility: This is not a question of design but rather an element of good management. It has sometimes been my experience that design objectives are not sufficiently thought through and specified in writing. Design responsibility is too often in the hands of people who are not aware of design problems.

It is very difficult to specify the design target for a corporation and its products. Design goals must reflect overall corporate objectives and policy.

3) Fit Design into the Structure of the Corporation: Is a designer

different from other employees? Design is so intangible a thing that in many cases management finds it difficult to know how to measure results, to be sure that it is getting the best in design. The question of where design should be in the corporate structure is not as important, it seems to me, as finding talented design leadership at the management level. A talented design executive will know how to build an effective design group, how to direct its activities, how to work with consultant industrial designers, and also, because he is at the management level, he will be able to coordinate design effectively with other areas such as engineering, sales, market research and advertising.

Good design is so intangible that it is easily watered down and compromised. It is unfortunate but true that everybody has something to say or contribute to the appearance of a product or a package. If design is "under" sales, it is likely to be pressured into too frequent changes and become gimmicked or tricky. Guiding good creative design through the maze of influence in even a medium-sized corporation today is no job for the inexperienced. It takes the most skilled type of leadership.

Conclusion: To realize good, competitive, effective design, management must recognize the unique nature of the design function and give it a status of its own.

A design must be produced, usually within a budget forecast and within a time schedule. Yet, despite the pressures of production plans and deadlines, you can't turn on creativity like a faucet, metering it out to a schedule. Creative ideas are hard to meter, hard to regiment. If you have built a good design team -- and this takes years -- and have given it well thought-out targets and clear responsibility, you will get optimum results. Good management presumes you are not always at "general quarters" fighting deadlines. (If you are, some long-range plans are in order.)

Pressure usually produces "gimmick styling". Longer range thinking produces design that is so good it has staying qualities.

The complete text of Mr. Lippincott's speech is available on request.

Bathtub Diplomacy

There is a large group of travelling Americans who have been avid adherents of the school of bathtub culture. They like to make a judgement on a country on the basis of the condition of the plumbing. By this measure, Rome is again become the center of world culture.

Although the Roman Senators no longer bathe in public in the buff, the picture of Roman bath facilities one of our staff brought back from Italy is almost as sybaritic as, if slightly more private than, the line cuts we used to muse over in our Latin classes.

First, that wonderful Italian tile. Our man says you can't help singing in a modern shower in Italy. Then, he reports, there's Gio Ponti's new toilet -- a bowl sculptured to such perfection it would not be out of place in the living room (plant in it, of course!). The new lavatories are thoroughly practical, yet refreshingly different in style, with faucets and other chrome particularly well modelled.

But the pièce de résistance in one hotel was a solid marble bathtub for two! No one has really lived, was our man's comment, until he has felt the soft luxury of a tub carved from a block of pink marble. We agree that marble is not a good medium for mass production -- but what is wrong with a tub for two?

Arrived home, he concluded Italian tubs are deeper, the water fills up so that only your nose sticks out. Says his tub at home now seems too small, too shallow. Query: is getting clean only a byproduct of bathing, do people take baths mostly for pleasure and relaxation? Could we not do as the Romans do, bring more luxury into the bathroom?

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